

AQAP DRONE STRIKES OBAMA'S AWLAKI DRONE STORY

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e a memo laying out its rationale for drone-killing American citizen Anwar al-Awlaki, AQAP released a video that challenges the narrative the Administration has used for doing so.

As Gregory Johnsen reports, the memo shows (see correction below) ~~former Gitmo detainee Said al-Shihri~~ embracing Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, then whispering in his ear.

In the video, Shihri says he was the head of external operations – the title the US always used to describe Anwar al-Awlaki.

The video says that it was Shihri – not Awlaki – who was “responsible for external operations against America.” For years, the Obama administration has argued the opposite, claiming that Awlaki was directing AQAP’s efforts against the U.S., including the failed underwear bomb on an airliner over Detroit on Christmas Day 2009.

On the day Awlaki was killed, Obama called him “the leader of external operations for al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula” and said he “directed” the 2009 attack. The video appears to refute both claims, giving credit to Shihri, the former Guantanamo Bay detainee.

Halfway through the video there is a

clip of Shihri embracing Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the underwear bomber in the Christmas Day attack, and whispering in his ear as a narrator reads that the attack was conducted “under the direct supervision of (Shihri) and a number of his brothers in the section in charge of external operations.”

While there may be some disagreement about how best to translate Shihri’s role – “directed” or “supervised” – this video clearly says that Shihri was in charge, directly to the contrary to the narrative DOJ released purportedly summarizing Abdulmutallab’s confession (the one that conflicted in key ways with his two other confessions).

What Johnsen doesn’t say – but is clear from comparison – is that that embrace took place while Abdulmutallab was dressed to make his martyrdom video.

Compare this frame, which appears just after the embrace in the new video (at 21:54),



With this one from Abdulmutallab’s martyrdom video (at 0:52).



That’s important because arranging to make the

martyrdom video is one of the tasks DOJ's narrative says Awlaki did.

Awlaki told defendant that he would create a martyrdom video that would be used after the defendant's attack. Awlaki arranged for a professional film crew to film the video. Awlaki assisted defendant in writing his martyrdom statement, and it was filmed over a period of two to three days. The full video was approximately five minutes in length.

~~Shihri's presence at the making of Abdulmutallab's martyrdom video doesn't refute~~ the claim that Awlaki had a role in making it (though none of the experts I have asked has ever given a remotely credible explanation why AQAP's greatest English-language propagandist and someone formally schooled in English would make a martyrdom video in Arabic). But it does place him there, suggesting Awlaki was not the only one directing the production of the video, if he had a role at all.

This video definitely doesn't prove that Awlaki didn't have an operational role in the UndieBomb attack. But it shows that the narrative the government released – which Abdulmutallab's lawyer said had been made in the context of a plea deal never finalized and which the government agreed not to rely on at the trial, where it could have been challenged – neglects not just the role of Fahd al-Quso, but also Said al-Shihri. It is, at the very least, incomplete in some important ways.

And yet that is the only public “proof” the government has ever released that justified their execution of Anwar al-Awlaki.

Update: Apparently al-Shihri isn't the one portrayed in this video, Nasir al-Wuhayshi is. In which case this connection is not meaningful.